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The Effectiveness of Reading Response Journals and Transactional Strategies Instruction in Developing EFL Student Teachers' Reading Comprehension Skills

A Thesis
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Abstract

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The present study aimed at developing the necessary literal, inferential, critical and creative reading comprehension skills necessary for EFL student teachers when reading narrative texts through the use of a proposed program based on reading response journals and transactional strategies instruction. The proposed program consisted of 15 sessions. Each session aimed to enhance one or more reading comprehension skills. This aim was attained through defining, modeling, guiding and encouraging students to use the reading strategy that corresponds to the skill in question. Subjects of the study were thirty three second year EFL student teachers from the Faculty of Women, Ain Shams University. A pre-post test of reading comprehension skills was administered. Results of the study indicated that there was a statistically significant difference at 0.01 level between the mean scores of the treatment group on the pre-test and the post test in overall reading comprehension in favour of the post test**.** It was concluded that the proposed program based on reading response journal and transactional strategies instruction was effective in developing EFL student teachers' comprehension of narrative texts.

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CHAPTER ONE

Chapter One
Introduction and Problem

Introduction:

English has become the international language of communication. Besides, it is one of the necessities of getting an academic degree, obtaining a job and even just living in this age in which English is the dominant language of technology, science and the internet. Hence, the English language holds an eminent place in Egypt as well as in most other countries. Consequently, English language teaching occupies a prominent position in the Egyptian schools and curricula. It is taught as a compulsory subject and as the first foreign language beginning from the first grade in all Egyptian government schools. Needless to say, promoting the English language competence requires developing the main language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking).

Reading, as one of the macro language skills, has an indispensable role in foreign language (FL) learning. It forms a tool of communication especially for those who have no opportunity to talk with native speakers of the foreign language. Through reading they can have an access to the foreign culture, customs and real-life situations. Eskey (2005, p. 563) asserts this idea as he states that "reading may be both a means to the end of acquiring the language, as a major source of comprehensible input, and an end in itself, as the skill that many serious learners most need to employ." Reading comprehension helps in all the other school subjects and in the personal and professional lives as well. Hence, the importance of teaching reading emerges.

Comprehension is the essence of reading as reading without Comprehension is just word-calling. Reading comprehension is not a passive skill as it was considered for a long time. Research helped us to recognize reading comprehension as an interactive, constructive and contextualized process with a key role in developing learners' communicative competence (Jaun & Flor, 2006, p. 261). Hence, reading comprehension is an active, constructive process, where

the reader interacts with the text and makes use of his previous experience and knowledge.

Reading is the process of negotiating meaning between a reader and an author through the medium of a text (Pearson, & Tierney, 1984, p. 145). The nature of the reading process implies that the reader has an active role in meaning construction. This view of the reader is further emphasized by Louise Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory as Karolides (1997, p. 8) states that "the active participatory role of readers encompasses -in conjunction with comprehension- discovering meaning, responding emotionally, and developing interpretation. Readers are not passive spectators of the text but active performers with the text."

Moreover, the transactional theory -reader response theory- gives equal voice to the reader and the text and acknowledges the conpenetration of a reader and a text, each conditioning the other. Meaning evolves from the fusion of the author's text and the reader's personality and experience (Karolides, 2000, p. 4).

According to reader response theory, the reading process is reflective and recursive- a forwards and backwards exploration of the text- rather than linear. Recursiveness may be an actual turning back of pages or a thoughtful reflection to previous events or passages. Such exploration can reveal additional nuances and developmental understandings. These understandings confirm the complexity of the reading process (Karolides, 1997, p. 12).

Several interpretations of a text are acceptable and there is not just one correct meaning. Karolides (2000, p. 8) clarifies why different meanings are generated as he states that "a range of responses results from the dynamic relationship between readers and text, from differences among readers, and from aspects of the text that are ambiguous or undefined."

Research indicated that students who participate in reader response approaches have been shown to become more reflective and more critical readers and to move to higher levels of thinking and richer understandings of

literature. They move from being passive readers to readers who take the time to think about, wonder and reflect upon what they have read (Spiegel, 1998, p. 45).

Reader response classes adopt teaching techniques that help students to construct rich interpretations. Karolides (2000, p. 21) mentions various strategies that serve to clarify and enrich the readers' perceptions. Oral discussions -as a class and in small groups of various numbers- of literary transactions, as well as various types of writing -journals, logs, free responses- encourage active reflection by individual students. These writing activities are especially valuable at the outset of a discussion to provide a preliminary outlet prior to the influence of assertive students, or at other times to allow for self-clarification or personal consideration of issues under discussion.

Enhancing reading comprehension requires students to be active during the reading process. However, Smith (1989, p. 172) mentions that even though we encourage students to be active readers, it is fairly easy to adopt a passive attitude while reading. But that is not the case when we respond to reading through writing. Zamel (1992, p. 471) argues that one can read without writing, but understanding is much deeper if response to that reading is done in writing. The very act of writing not only reflects thinking but actually stimulates it. This is what Rosenblatt (1994, p. 171) confirms when she indicated that any reading requires ‘writerly’ activities from the reader.

Sharing the same idea, Petrosky (1982, cited in Bainbridge & Pantaleo, 1999, p. 179) asserts that writing about reading is one of the best ways to get students to unravel their transactions so that we can see how they understand and in the process, help them learn to elaborate, clarify and illustrate their responses by reference to association and prior knowledge that inform them. Beginning writing activities consist of exploratory journal writing, focused responses, and reflective pieces. These activities help students to develop or complicate their thinking and they are by nature active, eliciting discovery, exploration, and hypotheses (Lifford et al. 2000, p. 47).

Hence, one of the most effective tools of responding to reading is writing in a reading response journal. Response journals are an important component of response-centered teaching with literature. These are notebooks in which Students can write before, during, and after reading. These journals can trigger discussions when talking together about books, during conferences with the teacher, or buddy reading (Cox, 1997, p. 43).

Roessing (2009, p. 3) indicates that the purpose of response journaling is reader reflection; the goal is better comprehension and a more profound understanding of text. Moreover, she mentions five key reasons for requiring written response. These reasons are:

1. To make response second-nature. Writing responses is somewhat artificial. After reading, responses are not usually written. Instead, they are thought and discussed with others. It is a training time.
2. To make individual assessment, both formative and evaluative, possible.
3. To allow for metacognition. Response journals allow students to reflect upon and respond to their thinking, thus permitting self-assessment. We write to find out what we are thinking, to work out the kinks, to take us deeper as we unravel our thoughts …
4. To increase comprehension. Using writing to organize our ideas about what we are reading enhances comprehension.
5. When students write, they are reading. Conversely, when students are reading, they are not typically writing. An added bonus of reading response is that students frequently write in conjunction with their reading. This can lead the way to other, more formal writings, including critical writing.

However, telling students to speculate, hypothesize, question, reflect, and wonder in their journals did not always result in responses where they actually thought about ambiguities, tried to fill in gaps, or pondered contradictory or alternative interpretations(Lifford, 2000, p. 47).